



Sailing Cold Waters Stewarts Gully Sailing Club

words: rachel smith images: rachel smith and supplied

The water changes from a cold blue green to milkshake brown as feet and trolleys trundle down the ramp, across the baked mud and into the water. Yachts float free of their trolleys, bodies clamber aboard, rudders are fixed, mainsheets pulled, sails fill, and centreboards drop. The tide is high, and the sun sparkles invitingly.

THE STEWARTS GULLY SAILING Club has been sailing on the Waimakariri River since 1950, making its home along the stretch of water which runs from the old bridge and down past the bend where the slow Kaiapoi River enters.

By the river is an old corrugated shed. Inside, boats line the walls like coffins, and a smell of river mud, dust and slowly mouldering carpet lingers even after the big doors slide open.

Back from the water, where pine trees once grew, is the club house. Dusty old couches lean against one another along one wall, the zip is on and there is a faint smell of pies warming in the oven. A sailing course is chalked on the board at the far end of the room.

The Stewarts Gully Sailing Club is home to a handful of die-hard Moth enthusiasts, and hosts to the NZ Moth New Zealand Championships over the summer. Among those sailing in this year's championships are many who have held the national title when competition was fierce across the country. This year there are ten boats competing in the two day competition, all from Stewarts Gully Sailing Club.

2014 champion Lindsay Russell, started sailing in 1989, with his children joining him, and son Jason going on to be an avid sailor. His grandson Levi Russell has a similar love for the water, holding the New Zealand Junior NZ Moth championship title himself.

It is fairly typical that families sail together at Stewarts Gully. Andy Holland and brother Mervyn were there when the club began. Inseparable as they grew up, much of their time was spent at their family bach at the Gully, as Stewarts Gully was known then, and out in boats on the Waimakariri River.

"That's how the kids at the Gully got on the water," says 80-year-old Andy. He and Mervyn would head downriver on the incoming tide to go fishing with other local kids, and more serious adult fishermen.

OPPOSITE: Roy Evans cruises back to shore after a day of racing.

Top right: "That's where I met Glen – on the river. That's why we're still sailing," says Beverley Church with husband Glen. Right: Lindsay Russell preps his yacht for the NZ Moth New Zealand Championships at Stewarts Gully Sailing Club.





Above: On a calm day it is hard to imagine the original clubhouse was nearly swept away in 1957 by flood waters which saw 12 metres of sandy shore line lost in just two hours.



Above: Selling tea, pies and sandwiches to visiting rowers was a key part of fundraising in the early days at Stewart's Gully Sailing Club. Photo supplied Andy Holland



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"It wasn't long before a sail of sorts appeared on the rowing boats," says Andy, after they watched other fishermen move easily along the river with the addition of sails.

The homemade sails were constructed from old tents or canvas covers, and row boats converted by sawing a hole in the front seat.

The original boats had their limitations – they could only run before the wind with one oar out the back for a rudder and another jammed down the side to act as a centreboard of sorts. It was self-taught sailing at its finest, with the boats racing each other home after fishing.

"The sails got bigger and the boats got better," says Andy, who eventually built his first sailing boat, a P Class Tauranga, with his brother.

Supportive parents of the new sailors got together to discuss the idea of a sailing club; the Stewart's Gully Sailing Club was formed, with the selected committee including Mervyn as treasurer at age 16.

Times were not always easy. The original club house, repurposed changing rooms moved on site by steam traction engine, was nearly swept away in the flood of 1957. The flood

saw 12 metres of sandy shore line lost in just two hours and much of the Gully underwater.

It was during these early days that a young Robert Smith began to come over to the river for a swim from his own family bach.

"I used to hang around the beach and they'd take me out for a bit of a ride," says Robert.

He is sailing today, an NZ Moth called *Huggy Bear*, one of the oldest in the fleet, with Robert winning the national championship in it a few years back.

His sister Beverley is in the starting box for this weekend's races. She started sailing just after her brother, her family buying an old boat which she painted pink and named *Miss Chiff*.

"That's where I met Glen – on the river. That's why we're still sailing," Beverley says of her husband who joined the club a few years later. They've sailed against and with each other, Beverley dashing indoors to feed her babies between races.

"Have fun," she says to Glen as he makes his way out onto the river, followed closely by their son Stephen.

With both his parents keen sailors Stephen, his two brothers and sister, all started sailing young.

Glen built Stephen's first boat, a buoyant box-shaped Optimist, with Stephen moving his way through to sailing NZ Moths when he was 18 years old. 26 years later he sails a Phoenix, with his wife Jade or 9-year-old daughter Casey crewing on most days.

"This boat's got that many scars on it," says Wally Thomas as he makes his final preparations, casting his eye over a gouge from a recent collision. The boat's wounds never hold him back from winning a race including, it turns out, the NZ Moth New Zealand Championship for 2015.



Above: Andy Holland still has a fondness for time on the water.



Top: Frank Newsome with brothers Andy and Mervyn Holland out fishing, before the family row boat was fitted with homemade sails. Photo supplied Andy Holland.

Above: A young Beverley Church with her first boat, *Miss Chiff*. Photo supplied Robert Smith



Above: Ten NZ Moths entered in this year's New Zealand Championship at Stewarts Gully Sailing Club.

Right: Katrina McKenzie is the only woman on the water for this year's weekend of racing.

"Some great national sailors have come out of Stewarts Gully," says Andy, remembering the likes of Mel Selwood in the early days, with Robert Smith, Wally Thomas and also himself, winning a wide range of national competitions over the years.

Lights come on in the starting box and a flag flutters in the easterly breeze. The boats make their way back and forward across the river behind the starting line, jostling for position, with calls of "starboard" and "right of way" and "watch out for the sandbank."

Katrina McKenzie is the only woman on the water. She started sailing later than most, moving straight into sailing NZ Moths and, like most, her family has a long association with the club.

The horn sounds and they are off, those in a good starting position moving quickly up upstream to the first mark.

The wind is fickle today, constantly changing direction and speed, and the sailors keep an ever watchful eye on their sails and the water. The wind disappears and a handful of boats founder, it gusts and one sailor is in the water.

A shag flies low across the water, the grey clouds reflected back from the cool depths of the river, white sails in the distance. ■

